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ABSTRACT

Parent participation in educational decision making is not a neural concept. When successful it can bring more effective decisions, a satisfied supportive public, and a stronger democracy. When it fails, it can leave in its wake a dissatisfied public. This research project involved observations of committee meetings and interviews with six parent participants on a district level attempting to implement an emotionally charged concept. It explores the needs and desires of the parents that inspired initial participation. The research determined some of the factors that contributed to the participants' overall levels of satisfaction with the committee experiences, and how, as a result of this experience, the parents' levels of satisfaction and support for the school district were affected. The positive as well as the frustrating and disappointing aspects of the committee experience are detailed. Some of the events and decisions that ultimately damaged the parent-administrator relationship of four out of the six previously supportive parents are described. It is concluded that when parents choose to be involved, they must be involved in satisfying ways. When educational leaders fail to recognize this, they run the risk of alienating the public and undermining future support for public education. (RJM)

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Parent Participation in Educational Decision Making: A High Stakes Procedure

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Abstract

The value of stakeholder participation in decision making in organizations has been touted for some time. Likewise, the importance of collaboration in the success and efficacy of change processes has also been discussed in the literature. However, parent participation has some risks inherent in the process. Both skeptics and advocates of participatory development recognize that it is a process fraught with difficulties, disappointments, and unkept promises. Frustration and hostility are often the result if the committee experience is not a satisfying one.

This research project involved observations of committee meetings and interviews with six parent participants on a district level committee created to implement an emotionally charged concept. It explored the needs and desires of the parents that inspired initial participation. It determined some of the factors that contributed to the participants' overall levels of satisfaction with the committee experience; and how, as a result of this experience, the parents' levels of satisfaction and support for the school district were effected. It uncovered positive as well as frustrating and disappointing aspects of the committee experience. It identified some of the events and decisions that ultimately damaged the parent/administrator relationship of four out of the six previously supportive parents involved the study.

"I guess the analogy is, well, we were friends, and now all of a sudden we're not! ... My thought is, was what I did worthwhile? Was this whole process a great public relations campaign and a master plan of deception?" These are the comments made by Phil, a parent in a rural, Northwest school district, who participated on a district-level advisory committee. One of the striking things about this comment is that it comes from a parent who was relatively satisfied with the school board and district office administrators when the committee experience first began.

Parent participation in decision making is not a neutral concept. As indicated by Phil's comment, it is a high stakes procedure. When successful, parent participation in educational decision making can bring substantial benefits--more effective decisions, a satisfied supportive public, and most important, a stronger democracy. But when it fails, parent participation can leave in its wake a dissatisfied and even restive public, ineffective decisions, and a weakened if not faltering democracy (Havighurst, 1979; Lareau, 1989; Thomas, 1995). These two dramatically different outcomes of parent participation are of great concern for individuals invested in a strong, public education system and a vital democracy.

Government and private "consumer" groups are increasingly calling for, even mandating, maximum feasible parent participation in school programs (Comer, 1980; Herman, 1980; Hightower, 1978; Zeldin, 1990). Most of the research on parent involvement in schooling has examined it primarily from the perspective of teachers or administrators (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Lightfoot, 1978; Thomas, 1995; Van Galen, 1987).

This perspective from "inside the system" fails to capture the very important perspective of the parent--a perspective which is vitally important when trying to understand the high stakes venture that is parent involvement in educational decision making.

This research project explored the needs and desires of the parents that inspired initial participation. It determined the factors that contributed to the participants' overall levels of satisfaction with the committee experience, and how, as a result of this experience, the parents' levels of satisfaction and support for the school district were effected. Positive, as well as frustrating and disappointing, aspects of the committee experience were uncovered. It identified some of the events and decisions that ultimately damaged the parent/administrator relationship of four out of six previously supportive parents. This research contributes to the ongoing dialogue among researchers, educators, legislators, and parents regarding parent involvement in decision making by supplying insights into how parent perceptions are affected by committee participation.

Conceptualization

The United States public school system has been considered a leading carrier of democratic values and traditions for at least the past eighty years. The health of our democracy has been linked with a strong, universal education system (Comer, 1980; Gutmann, 1987; Meier, 1995; Soder, 1996). There is wide societal acceptance of Jefferson's tenet "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." The health of our public schools, in turn, requires the support of the public. Strong citizen support for public schools is crucial in

order for them to remain viable institutions (Bryk & Rollow, 1992; Gutmann, 1987; Herman, 1980). (See appendix for a graphic representation of the conceptual framework.)

Maintaining public support of public education is a complex challenge. Although issues such as curriculum and instruction, personnel, and student learning certainly impact public satisfaction and support, these were not the focus of this research project. Instead, this inquiry examined one reform concept that is receiving increased attention: the active involvement of parents in educational decision making.

Participation

The value of stakeholder participation in decision making in organizations has been touted for some time (Blank, 1984; Lesieur & Puckett, 1969; Likert, 1961; McGregor, 1960). Likewise, the importance of collaboration in the success and efficacy of change processes has been discussed in the literature (Bennis, Benne, & Chin, 1961; Dobbs, 1993; Rogers, 1961). Individuals are more inclined to support change decisions in which they are involved. Their participation reduces resistance, obtains commitment, and increases the quality of change decisions (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Robbins, 1990). Moreover, participation is perhaps the most critical element in resolving issues in a shared-power environment. Any process that excludes participation of the people who are recipients of the service and who have a direct interest in policy decisions must end up lacking in responsiveness to needs (Gittell, 1979; Zimmerman, 1972). Giving parents more and better opportunities to take part in their own governance can transform them from passive recipients to citizens vested in and supportive of those arrangements. Similarly, the

broadening of participatory opportunities can strengthen society by assuring that the actions of government are embedded in society, rather than imposed on society.

Community Support

Not only has much been written to justify parental involvement in decision making, researchers also note a strong link between parent involvement in decision making and greater community support (Blank, 1984; Davies, Burch, & Johnson, 1992; Decker & Decker, 1994; Dobbs, 1993; Epstein, 1992; Gittel, 1979; Gotts & Purnell, 1985; Riedel, 1972). Gutmann, (1987) believes that the more effective the control that citizens have over school policies, the more likely they are to support them. The encouragement of broad-based involvement capitalizes on another principle. Generally, the greater the number and diversity of people involved in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of education opportunities, the greater the likelihood that needs will be met and support for education will be developed and maintained (Decker & Decker, 1994).

Risks

However, parent participation has some risks inherent in the process. Havighurst, (1979, p. 34) has noted, "The so-called 'solutions'--decentralization, community control, even community participation--are mainly slogans rather than closely worked out concepts with consequences understood and accounted for." Both skeptics and advocates of participatory development recognize that it is a process fraught with difficulties, disappointments, and unkept promises. One problem lies in the risk of tokenism--only marginal results, wrapped in new packaging, leading not to an alternative model of

development but rather to the reinforcement of central power. It may end up being "system maintaining" rather than "system transforming." Participation often involves a tremendous investment of both time and energy--both of which are in short supply in the fast-paced lives of today's parents. Frustration and hostility are often the result if the committee experience is not a satisfying one (Decker & Decker, 1994; Simmons, Stevenson, & Strnad, 1993; Steinberg, 1975). "When the quality of the experience fails to satisfy the participants, or when participation is thwarted or obstructed, demands for control may arise and efforts may be made to acheive a totally separate structure over which the community exercises essentially autonomous control" (Jenkins, 1976, p. 28).

Hirschman (1970) sought to show that in response to an unsatisfying environment or situation some people exit the situation, some continue to voice their opinion, and others exist in a passive state of loyalty or resignation. Lyons and Lowery (1986, 1989) elaborated on Hirschman's work, viewing exit as an active destructive response to dissatisfaction.

Issues of Quality

Obviously, frustration and hostility run counter to the goal of increased support of public schools. Therefore, the quality of the participation experience becomes crucial. A note of caution regarding the complex issues surrounding the "quality" of the committee experience is embedded in much of the literature (Collins, 1993; Fleming, 1993; Graves, 1972; Hightower, 1978; Steinberg, 1971). Some of the factors that researchers suggest influence the quality of the experience from the perspective of the parent are: a sense of

making a difference (Collins, 1993); time well spent on engaging, meaningful topics (Flemming, 1993); a clear sense of purpose, especially if arrived at collaboratively (Zeldin, 1990); and the membership of the committee, including the representative nature of the group (Steinberg, 1974; Thomas, 1995).

Power & Influence

Another factor mentioned by researchers is the issue of power, authority, and influence (Fine, 1993; Shaeffer, 1991; Simmons, Stevenson, & Strnad, 1993; Thomas, 1995; Zeldin, 1990). Fine (p. 684) claims that "...questions of power, authority, and control must be addressed head-on within debates about parental involvement in public schools." Fine describes it as the difference between "getting a voice" and "getting a hearing." Arnstein (1969) focused on the redistribution of power as an essential element in meaningful citizen participation.

However, a different perspective regarding this issue of power is heard from Dauber and Epstein (1993). They indicate that the parents in their studies have been concerned with issues other than power. "...*power*, *authority*, and *control*. These are not the words that most parents use when they express how they want to be involved in their children's education. They use words like *information*, *communication*, and *participation*" (p. 715).

Motivating Topics

Different issues and topics also influence varying degrees of motivation for participation. Issues that challenge norms, traditions, and beliefs are likely to inspire higher levels of parent participation in the decision making opportunities offered on educational

committees. Opposition typically follows any innovation that seriously shakes the foundation of the school's structures or schedules (Glass, 1992).

Multi-tracked, modified school calendar (MSC) is an example of an innovation which has the potential to shake the foundation. Students are assigned to four different "tracks." Each track attends school on a sixty-day school/twenty-day vacation rotation. Every twenty days one of the tracks rotates off on vacation while the other three tracks are in session. This plan increases a school building's capacity to house students by more than thirty percent; however, it challenges a hundred-year-old tradition dating back to the "adoption" of the agrarian calendar, which has three months off in the summer. This concept is also relatively "new," with all of the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the "unknown." All families and the entire community are impacted if a school board decides to implement this as a solution to overcrowded schools.

Design and Method of Study

All of these considerations provide the backdrop for this research. The goal of my research study is to provide greater understanding in the following areas:

- What needs or beliefs do parents have that inspire them to participate on district-level, educational committees?
- What factors or issues of quality contribute to the participants' levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the committee experience?
- What is the impact of the committee experience on these parents and how are the parents' overall levels of satisfaction and expressed support for the school district

effected?

Setting

This was a single case, exploratory study of a committee that was formed to oversee a local school district's transition to a district-wide, multi-tracked, Modified School Calendar (MSC). I selected this committee using a sampling strategy that Miles and Huberman's (1994) called intensity sampling. I looked for an "information rich case that manifests the phenomenon intensely but not extremely" (p. 28).

History of the issue.

The rural district in which the committee functioned was led by administrators whose actions seem generally well-informed by educational literature. All of the district's seven schools had experienced a steady influx of new students as a result of housing growth in the community and were now bulging at the seams with children. For example, the high school, built to house 900 students, opened the 1995-96 school year with over 1400. It had been seven years since the community had approved any money for school construction. In September, the school board declared that there were now only two acceptable solutions available to them to deal with the current situation of system-wide overcrowding: double-shifting or multi-track, MSC. They held two public forums to receive input from the public on these two options. Much controversy and criticism accompanied the entire process. Over 500 people attended the second public forum.

During both public forums the superintendent announced that a community task force would be formed to help implement the school board's final decision. In October, the

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school board voted to implement MSC. The district followed up the initial invitation to participate in a community task force with appeals for volunteers which appeared in four local newspapers and every school newsletter. In addition, area business leaders received phone calls from the superintendent encouraging their participation. The written and oral invitations for involvement contained the following job description: "The MSC advisory committee is charged with the responsibility to oversee the planning required to transition from a traditional school year to a modified school year" (Handout 1-17-96).

MSC Committee.

There were forty participants on the general MSC committee. From this MSC Committee I selected the smaller task force which tackled the volatile issue of track assignments. This group established both the rules for initial track assignment and a grievance procedure for parents denied their request for a particular track.

There were four reasons why this sub committee of this MSC committee was selected to study. First, this committee was created to function at the district level, not just at the building level. Its recommendations would be presented directly to the school board. Second, the issue of modified school calendar was a "hot" topic that impacted all parents, students, and educators within this school district. Traditions were set to be broken and family patterns disrupted. Educational norms and beliefs were impacted. Third, there was a tight time line for decision making. The district was to begin the new MSC schedule within nine months. Finally, I was able to observe the discussions from the very first committee meeting when participants had their first opportunities to share their

ideas and ask their questions, allowing hints at their perspectives.

Participants

As a result of my decision to observe and interview parents involved in the MSC Advisory Committee, this study is not based on a systematically drawn sample--nor are the participants presented as a representative sample of the school district's parent population. Instead, these participants are of a "naturally occurring group."

The six parents and two administrators volunteered more than twenty hours of their time in nine meetings extending from January through April. In these meetings the parents developed a specific set of potentially controversial recommendations and procedures. Implementation of these recommendations by the school board would impact all families with children attending this public school. Due to the small size of this task force I was able to interview all three females and three males who volunteered for this committee experience. I also interviewed one of the administrators.

The choice to study the parents from this particular task force was deliberate. As mentioned before, researchers have noted six aspects of the committee experience which they believe influence the quality of the experience for the parent participants: a sense of making a difference (Collins, 1993); time well spent on engaging, meaningful topics (Flemming, 1993); a clear sense of purpose, especially if arrived at collaboratively (Zeldin, 1990); the membership of the committee, including the representative nature of the group (Steinberg, 1974; Thomas, 1995); and the perception that a decision has a direct impact on the individual (Verba, 1969). Due to the intensity of this particular committee

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"assignment" the interviews with the six parents on this grievance committee were able to shed light on all of these aspects of quality of experience and committee member satisfaction.

Sue, Lois, Peter, Phil, Bob, and Evelyn were all parents with children in the district. They were all middle-class, European-Americans, busy with their careers and families. All of these parents began this committee experience generally supportive of the school district.

Observations

I acted as a non-participant observer during eight of the nine committee meetings, supplementing all observations and field notes with transcripts made from using the audio tapes recorded during the meetings. These observations aided my research efforts in several ways. My goal was to have my presence become familiar to the parents so they would respond with greater ease and depth of thought to my interview questions. The nature of the research, which probed the needs, beliefs, and levels of satisfaction of the committee participants, required a significant level of trust and comfort with the researcher. My observations also provided me with specific issues or events which I used not only in my interviews, but also to make sense of interview responses and other data.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the six taskforce committee members. There were three rounds of interviews, with each interview averaging one hour in length (see appendix for complete list of interview questions). The first interview occurred in late March; the second was conducted in late April; and the final interview transpired during the

second week of May. The timing of these interviews was deliberate. The late-March interview probed the parent participants' perceptions of the committee experience regarding issues such as the representative nature of the group, the tolerance within the group for diverse viewpoints, and the responsiveness of the school officials to their opinions and concerns. I also inquired into the needs and beliefs that inspired them to participate on this committee.

The second interview at the end of April was scheduled to coincide with another MSC milestone. By the end of April all parents should have received notification of their family's track assignment. Even the most optimistic participants realized that this would be a time when the "rubber met the road" or perhaps when something "hit the fan." I continued exploring the parents' perceptions of the quality of their experience. This included their perceptions of the meaningfulness of their task, their sense of authority, and access to information. I also explored their thoughts regarding the role of the committee as well as their responses to the district's written description of their role.

This retrospective look was aided by the use of two documents: the letter from the superintendent that was sent to all participants prior to the first meeting, and the hand out from the initial meeting which described the committee's overall charge and its five responsibilities. As the participants read through each document I asked them to "think aloud" to try to understand their thoughts and reactions to what was written.

As the second interviews started to unfold something totally unexpected happened. The school board suddenly shifted its position regarding the implementation of

MSC, deciding instead to "continue to explore other options." The participants' knowledge of and responses to what was currently happening with MSC and the school board suddenly took on increased importance.

My final interview during the second week of May again captured the evolving nature of the participants' perceptions. Since their task force recommendations appeared to be set aside by the school board, I continued to probe their knowledge of and response to current actions by the school board and the administration. I revisited their satisfaction with the committee experience. I asked questions about their current level of satisfaction with the district and I tried to establish the impact that the committee experience had on the parent participants.

This interview schedule allowed me to assess the participants for changes in motivation, frustration, satisfaction, etc. as they evolved over the course of six weeks. Since the interviews started just after the task force had completed its work I was initially concerned that the demands of taking a retrospective look at the experience would limit the findings. However, I quickly realized that the focus on the implementation stage allowed me to capture data that was compelling in their implications for participants' ultimate relationship with the district. If I had only analyzed the committee experience as it unfolded and stopped when the task force finished their MSC policy recommendations I would have missed a crucial and very complex part of the participants' experience.

I also conducted one interview with the district level administrator who attended all of the task force meetings. This interview explored his thought regarding the actions of

this committee and the efforts of the district office to involve parents in decision making. I probed his attitudes and beliefs regarding parent participation in decision making as well as his perceptions of the risks and benefits of opening up the process.

Additional data

All documents and written work generated by and for the committee was collected. Attendance sheets, meeting minutes, and hand-outs were compiled to supplement my observations and interviews. I also gathered the newspaper and newsletter documents used to solicit involvement. This knowledge enriched the interviews and subsequent analysis.

Analysis

All of the interviews were audio-taped. In addition, field notes were taken both as an information collection back-up as well as to capture nuances such as body language. The tapes were all transcribed verbatim. They were then coded and analyzed.

Coding the Data

I followed a coding procedure that Korpi (1988) described. I established an initial set of codes, that was aligned with the findings from the literature on this topic, then applied the codes to a sample set of data and enlisted the help of an independent coder to help me check out the usefulness of my coding system. This resulted in some of the codes being eliminated or subsumed under other coding categories. I then applied the coding system to the transcripts of all eighteen hours of interviews. The final coding table is presented in the appendix.

Korpi's (1988, p. 45) suggestion of "segmentation," which involves organizing comments into units of thought rather than a specific number of words or lines, was followed. A sentence containing more than one unit of thought could be given two or three codes. Or, a group of several sentences could be given a single code if the unit of thought did not change. All thoughts or ideas were given a code.

Coding was a first step to help reduce the massive amount of data that was available from the interviews, observations, and documents. Additional efforts to organize the data in a manner which allowed trends and patterns to emerge included the use of data displays, as encouraged by Miles and Huberman, (1993). It was the search for patterns and trends that formed the backbone of my approach to analyzing the data.

Findings

Analysis of the coded transcripts and the subsequent displays revealed some interesting patterns in the data. Much of what the participants shared was consistent with what is mentioned in the literature. However, my research unearthed interesting information that is not generally mentioned in the research regarding parent participation in decision making.

Professions and Perceptions.

As I coded and placed the parents' reactions and responses to the committee experience into the displays an intriguing pattern began to emerge (Figure 1). I loosely divided the participants into two categories: service sector careers (registered nurse, police officer, and educational assistant) and business careers (contractor, installation

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officer, and accountant). With the data now displayed by their professions there appeared to be a connection between professions and perceptions regarding MSC. Business people indicated that MSC made good business sense and were more positive about the prospects of implementing it. In contrast, the three parents from service sector professions were neutral to negative about MSC. They were uncomfortable with the way MSC was going to impact them and their family. As I continued with my analysis, this grouping of careers continued to hold as a steady pattern in their reactions to events after the school board changed its mind.

Influence of Professions?

Personal factors	Service sector careers			Business careers		
	Sue	Lois	Peter	Phil	Bob	Evelyn
Response to Modified School Calendar	I wouldn't be disappointed if we didn't..or if we did do MSC	inconvenient.. change is hard.. however, it can help kids educationally	uncomfortable with it ... would prefer traditional	provides higher quality education -- efficient utilization of resources	Positive - Good to use the school year round -- good for kids	initial fear of change but likes the idea now.. likes vacations spread thru out year

Figure 1

Role of Information.

Information and communication were both identified by the participants as being important factors that cut across all three areas of my research: motivations, satisfaction with the committee experience and ultimate satisfaction with the district. I was surprised by the strength of the participants' need and desire for information. All six participants indicated that access to information was an important motivator for involvement. This

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closely paralleled Dauber & Epstein's (1993) findings regarding the desires expressed by parents for information and communication. Peter was typical in his response, "Primarily (I get involved) to get the straight news, to understand what is being decided on at the beginning and not just have it appear in the mailbox some day." Generally not satisfied with the districts current communication channels, they wanted "hot information," the inside scoop. Parents in the study used their position of knowing to have a better sense of control over their lives and to shape their own life experiences. The main beneficiary of this information was their family. Evelyn stated, "I wanted to be aware of what was going on. I wanted to make sure that I knew what was best for my kids!"

Needs or beliefs that inspire parents to participate

Beliefs/Motivations	Service sector careers			Business careers		
	Sue	Lois	Peter	Phil	Bob	Evelyn
Access to info - news "hot" and "straight"	X	X	X	X	X	X
For my kids sake	X	X	X	X	X	X
Assist/be helpful	X	X	X	X	X	
Need to make the best of difficult situation	X			X	X	
Affect change		X			X	
Civic responsibility	X		X	X		

Figure 2

As you can see from Figure 2 the parents were motivated by information, their children, and their sense of civic responsibility. They wanted to be helpful and they wanted to be good role models for their children. Sue indicated, "One of the big concerns I had was for my kids. I don't want them to hear all the negativism and then be forced into that

situation (MSC) thinking or believing that Mom or Dad are really against it, that it's terrible."

Issues of Quality

The parents solidly confirmed two of the four factors that researchers suggested influenced the perception of the quality of the experience. The confirmed factors were: a sense of making a difference (Collins, 1993); and time well spent on engaging, meaningful topics (Flemming, 1993). The other two factors; a clear sense of purpose, especially if arrived at collaboratively (Zeldin, 1990); and membership of the committee, including the representative nature of the group (Steinberg, 1974; Thomas, 1995) were partially confirmed.

Making a Difference.

Five of the six participants confirmed Collins's research (1993). They indicated that the work that their committee did made a difference: to their family; the school district; and the community. They felt it was very important to create a solid standard and criteria for the grievance procedure. All of the parents commented that the group did a quality job. Pride in their work was woven into their comments regarding their satisfaction with the committee experience. Bob's comment was typical. "I'm very happy that I took the time to participate in this so I'm a much better parent. I feel like I did something in my child's interest."

Time Well Spent on Meaningful Topic.

MSC was definitely a topic that grabbed all six of these parents' attention. It was a

complex issue that the parents considered very relevant to their lives. Three of the parents stated that the issues assigned to this taskforce, track assignment and grievance procedures, were the most critical and meaningful issues assigned to any of the task forces. They found the committee work fascinating, reporting it was challenging, complex, and potentially controversial. Sue said, "I thought (the committee) was great, I loved it! I like to be challenged with somthing completely new....it really made me think, and think in terms of global pictures, not just my little world. I had to consider all of the possibilities."

Flemming (1993) also included in his research the importance of having a committee experience that confirmed to the participants that their time was well spent. This issue of quality was also confirmed. The importance of their time being well spent and not wasted was mentioned by four of the six parents. When the district changed its mind regarding MSC this factor was specifically mentioned as contributing to the frustration and disappointment of these four parents. All of the committee participants had busy lives. Being gone for twenty hours from their families was a tremendous sacrifice. Bob indicated, "What I found meaningful, was not just the sense of contributing to the community, but knowing that what we were doing was going to be used." When this didn't happen he was clearly upset. Sue stated that she was mortified that the district would change its mind after all the work that she did.

Clear Sense of Purpose.

A clear sense of purpose was one of the factors presented as influencing the participants' levels of satisfaction (Zeldin, 1990). This study only partially confirmed

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Zeldin's research. All of the parents verbalized their appreciation of the committee's clear sense of purpose. Peter was very clear about how much this aspect of the committee contributed to his sense of satisfaction. "What impacted me most about this committee was that we met, we met regularly, we were faithful to the meetings and we got it done! We stuck to the task at hand and there is a real sense of accomplishment when you can do that in a committee."

However, the fact that that purpose was arrived at solely by the district and *not arrived at collaboratively*, which was the second half of Zeldin's statement, did not bother these parents. They felt satisfied with the experience. They were not troubled by the fact that their task had been determined by the district. After all, the predetermined task had been explained to them by the written and oral invitations for involvement. If, however, the act of joining such a group, with its goals and purpose defined so clearly, in advance, by the district was actually a form of collaboration or agreement of purpose on the part of the participants then both parts of Zeldin's statement would be supported by my research.

Committee Membership.

A second "half-way" confirmed factor was the membership of the committee (Steinberg, 1974; Thomas, 1995). The collegiality of the group was a favorite part of the committee experience. Sue's comment was typical. "The people on this committee were wonderful! I mean they were just so friendly and cooperative. It wasn't formal and stiff. You could just be yourself and we were very supportive of one another." This group did

not confirm the second half of Steinberg and Thomas' theory regarding the representative nature of the group. Parents who were critical of MSC and/or critical of the school administration were not represented in this committee. Although four of the parents wished that people with alternative viewpoints would have volunteered to participate on the committee the absence of this diversity was mentioned, but not mourned. It did not interfere with their satisfaction with the committee experience. One factor that might have influenced this finding is the fact that my research focused on the quality of the experience from a participant's standpoint rather than the perception of quality from the viewpoint of other parents or community "on-lookers."

Power and Influence.

Surprisingly, only two out of the six parents, indicated that they were motivated to participate to affect change. Lois indicated, "I would much rather be in a position where I can find out at the inception what is happening, what the issues are, and have some ability to perhaps assist and affect change in that and write some of the policy." The other four indicated that power was not a motivating factor. Peter was one of the four that was quite clear about this. "I never thought in terms of power and authority....to me it was more of an issue of the importance of and the criticalness of what the committee needed to do...I know it sounds altruistic but in my mind I was hoping we would create a piece of work that would relieve some of the pressure off the district."

This issue of power is a very complex one. A more comprehensive definition of power seems essential. When the parents described the committee experience, three

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different "dimensions" of power or empowerment were mentioned by the parents. First, they did feel empowered to speak their minds, which was one of Fine's (1993) criteria for empowerment. When asked to comment on the level of tolerance for diverse opinions or beliefs that existed during the committee, Evelyn's response was typical. "I think that everyone was pretty well open! ... I think that the people there realized that you have to listen to different viewpoints in order to get it where it comes out....I didn't feel intimidated about expressing my viewpoint or asking questions at all!"

Second, the parents were also very clear that they neither envisioned nor coveted a broader role. Even at their peak frustration times with the district, three of the parents mentioned their respect for the "professionalism" of the administrators. They did **not** seek an expansion of their own role. During the final interview when Bob was still very frustrated with the district for "wavering" he stated,

> Someone's got to make a choice somewhere and that should be the administration. They're the ones who are in the best position, we as parents are not. I'm certainly not the person to make that decision. I think we need intelligent people, who know education and know school administration and know what is best for kids, to make those kind of decisions for us.

Finally, when I asked if there were changes that they might have made to this MSC process if they were superintendent, two indicated that they couldn't think of anything that they would change. After long pauses, three simply responded that they wished a couple more people with opposing viewpoints could have been on the committee to make it even

more creative. Even though four of the participants mentioned that the district should have done a better job at deciding what it wanted to do, focused harder on selling the idea of MSC to the public, and stuck with their plan and "not caved in" they did not mention an expansion of *their* power and authority in order to press for such a sequence of events.

Although their responses to interview questions indicated a relaxed stance about the scope of their own authority, the power that four parents felt they had during the actual committee meetings increased their satisfaction with the committee experience. They felt unrestrained by the administrators, free be creative in the completion of the task that they had accepted. These four parents also expressed satisfaction with the empowered role they had recommended for the MSC grievance committee that would have ultimately received any disputed track assignment occuring between disgruntled parents and administrators. "I feel strongly that if we don't have some authority, then what good is it?" (Meeting 2-9). Even though there were two members who did not want to undermine the authority of the principal their concerns was countered with, " I would hate for this committee to be viewed by the community as nothing more than a district puppet." (Meeting 2-15). One result of not implementing MSC was that their recommendations remained untested and as such, the participants were able to retain a very positive impression regarding how their work might have actually been implemented by the district. Sue's comment was indicative of this sentiment, "If (the district) doesn't implement it, we still did a good job...it's still there and they can use it another time if they need it."

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Impact of committee on participants

This research revealed that participation on the committee was perceived by the participants as impacting them in five different ways (see Figure 3). Once again, information was cited by all six parents as one important way that the experience impacted their lives. A second, related impact of information referred to the persuasive nature of the committee experience. During the first two meetings of the large group committee the participants heard almost four hours of information, first from the district office administrators and then from a MSC guest speaker from California who presented at the second meeting. After the presentations were heard and their questions were answered, the opinions of all six participants regarding MSC were positively affected. Lois indicated, "Change is hard for people.....Being a part of the committee made me accept the idea (of MSC) more. I felt more comfortable with the idea."

Impact of Committee experience

Factors influenced	Service sector careers				Business careers		
	Sue	Lois	Peter		Phil	Bob	Evelyn
Information	X	X	X		X	X	X
Positively impacted opinion about Modified School Calendar	X	X	X		X	X	X
Got to know administrator and was very impressed	X		X			X	X
Learned district wasn't "flying by the seat of its pants	X		X		X	X	X
Increased their level of satisfaction with the district			X		X	X	X
When district changed its mind-committee experience intensified their response					X angry	X irritated	X lost faith

Figure 3

A third positive aspect that four of the members mentioned was that the committee had given them a chance to get to know the administrator who facilitated the group. They were impressed. Both Sue and Peter agreed. "John (the administrator) is just incredible! I've heard his name for years and I've never met the man!" "I was very impressed with John and his commitment and his dedication to coming to those meetings!"

Another positive impact of the committee again circled back to the information issue. Five parents indicated that they were very impressed that the district was not "flying by the seat of its pants." They were amazed at the amount of work that went into the planning. Prior to their participation they had not realized that the district had actually been studying MSC for three years. When Peter heard neighbors being critical of the district he replied, "Having seen the kind of work that the district has done, I think my perspective is certainly different."

The final positive impact in my findings would also make the administrators smile. During the three months of actual committee work, four of the six participants indicated their overall level of satisfaction with the district increased. The remaining two parents maintained their initial positive regard of the district. These parents felt proud of the work that they had done and were pleased with the relationship they felt they had established with the administration.

If the story had ended here, the committee would have been a resounding success story. However, as sometimes occurs in the politics, the school board ended up changing the decision that had been made in October and MSC was placed on hold. This change of

mind and how the district level administrators responded, or in most cases, did not respond, inspired hurt feelings and outright anger.

Intensified Reactions.

The reactions of the participants to the school board decision were very complex (see appendix). When asked if the committee experience influenced their feelings, all three of the parents who were most upset were very clear that being on the committee intensified their reactions. They attributed this to the knowledge that they had gained while on the committee. Again, we see the role that information plays in this process. Now however, information showed itself to be a double-edged sword. For instance, Evelyn (5-10) said that she had lost faith in the district. "If I hadn't been on the committee, I'd probably still have my blinders on. If I hadn't heard everything that had gone into it, I probably wouldn't be quite so upset."

Reactions and Satisfaction

As Decker & Decker (1994), Simmons, Stevenson, & Strnad (1993), and Steinberg (1975) had indicated, when the committee experience became unsatisfying, frustration and hostility occurred for three of the six participants. These reactions occurred during the implementation phase of the committee experience. There were two very strong reactions: the change of mind was bad business and a waste of money; and the closing of communication channels and lack of personal contact was "like being dumped." Satisfaction levels, which had been at it's highest point for all of the participants during the committee experience, dropped.

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Bad Business.

The pattern noted previously regarding the differences that can be discerned between the two professional groups continued here. Their own jobs, their initial view of MSC, and now their frustration with the district all seemed interrelated. The three people who came to the committee from a business background reacted most intensely to the board decision. Bob stated, "It's actually taken me 180 degrees from what I believed before. I thought what we were doing was really well thought out, making the best of a poor situation. Now we've made it worse and they've really compromised....I feel that, for myself, who was an ardent school supporter, very compromised on the leadership." The reactions from these three parents included the belief that the new decision was bad business. Once you make a decision you stick with it; wavering was bad policy. There was the belief that this would result in a terrible waste of time and money.

Bad Relationship.

The service sector group also had a negative reaction to the decision. However, in one of the most fascinating twists to my findings, their reactions focused on the personal side of their relationship with the district. These reactions are important to notice. There was the perception that after four months on the committee rapport between themselves and the district had been established. Once the School Board and the superintendent started to waver, committee work and communication ground to a halt. The parents felt the information pipeline that they had consciously sought and enjoyed while on the committee was all dried up, and they were back to hearing things from the community

grapevine instead of straight from the district. Sue indicated, "I found it very interesting when my neighbor informed me that she had heard that the board was waffling on some of their decisions...As a committee member I thought we would get a fax or an e-mail...I found that odd after all the time that we spent."

By the end of their committee experience these were parents who knew that there was information out there that they did not have. They "knew" that there was information being talked about, because they had been part of those kinds of conversations during their committee meetings. Now all of a sudden they were being excluded from those conversations. This creates a whole different dynamic. They felt they were being ushered out the door.

When the district finally did call each of them, the call was made by a secretary whom none of them knew. This perceived lack of: a personal touch; closure; and communication inspired comments by five of the six members. "Monday I got a phone call that said the meeting for tomorrow night is cancelled and that's all...goodbye. I mean, they didn't give us any information; it would have been nice if they had called us and said, 'This is why we're doing it." or send us a letter or something instead of an informal person; I mean, it's not even anybody I even know...I kind of felt used, brushed aside kind of, like you're not important anymore." Lois's reaction clearly indicates the strong, personal nature of her reaction to this phone call and the absence of information that it represented.

This uncomfortable feeling of being dumped or forgotten was not limited to the

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three service sector workers. It was mentioned by five of the six participants. Phil was clearly upset. "I guess the analogy is well, we were friends, and now all of a sudden we're not...It's such a shearing, such a cut, such a severing of relationship ties....My thought is, was what I did worthwhile? Was this whole process a great public relations campaign and a master plan of deception?"

It is important to remember that all six of these participants began their committee experience supportive of the district office administration and school board. To start with your positive parents and to end with all but one of them being dissatisfied or disgruntled is not healthy for this district. The district set up a mechanism that was designed to increase parent support but it ended up doing the opposite. Some actions ended up alienating and angering the committee parents and other, easily preventable actions such as the phone call from the secretary ended up being disconcerting and discourteous.

Participants' levels of satisfaction over time

Satisfaction	Service sector careers			Business careers		
	Sue	Lois	Peter	Phil	Bob	Evelyn
Initial satisfaction with district (quotes)	fine	I really want to defend them!	Quite satisfied.	O.K seems sincere	Ardent school supporter	felt sorry for the district
Overall satisfaction with committee (quotes)	good	really positive	very positive	great!	very good	good
Satisfaction with district during final interviews (quotes)	haven't lost faith	they're doing the best they can	still positive, but qualified	I feel angry with the district	lower than it's ever been	lost faith- - dissatis-fied

Figure 4

The parent participants' levels of satisfaction over time is included in Figure 4. As

John, the administrator, acknowledged, "I believe that the last six weeks has, even with our strongest supporters, hurt us in relationship to trust and credibility....I feel it will have an effect in the years to come."

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This was perhaps, an unusual committee. It was an advisory group created to recommend a track assignment process and a grievance procedure to aid the district in implementing a decision that the school board had already made. The task was narrow in scope and considered to be a "parent issue." Ultimately, these factors may have influenced the final group membership. No teachers accepted the district's invitation to join this taskforce nor did any parent who was either critical of the efforts of the district or opposed to MSC. Future studies would be strengthened by seeking committees with participants from more diverse populations: "critically," culturally, and economically.

Further research could also explore "two insights and a hunch." First, during the interviews with a few of the parents I noticed an evolution of their comments regarding school critics. Two of the parents began to align themselves with, or started to explore the legitimacy of, the dissenters' positions. In the initial interview Evelyn caustically catagorized the dissenters as "complainers." In the final interview she indicated "I'm just kind of stuck thinking if I've been naive up to this point. Does that other group have a point? I've lost faith in the district." Further explorations of this aspect would be interesting to help further our understanding of the consequences of this type of dissatisfaction.

My second insight had to do with the potential influence of careers. I was surprised by how professions may influence parents responses to events and information. As we continue to seek out people from all corners of the community to join us in our efforts to effectively educate students it would be helpful to more fully understand any potential influences or expectations that different occupations, with different perspectives, might bring to an education committee experience.

My final hunch has to do with the "power" of information and the importance of maintaining a respectful relationship with parents. The parents of this study did not want additional power; they wanted information and "common courtesy." Schools are a complex, incredibly political world. By more fully understanding the power of information and courtesy educators might discover they they are currently overlooking two things that are well within their power to deliver. However, the importance of these two issues is not often explored in the literature.

My findings indicated that these parents got involved to get hot information, to get in on the inside track. If that is the case, then they need to stay on the inside track until their function as a committee participant is exhausted. Additional research should be done so that administrators could take this factor into account, maintaining those information ties at least until the eventual disbanding of any committee.

Conclusion

Parent participation in decision making is not a neutral concept. It is a high stakes venture with important outcomes for public education. A satisfying, robust,

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public education system and a vital democracy are inexorably linked. When parents choose to be involved, they must be involved in satisfying ways. When educational leaders fail to recognize this they run the risk of alienating the public and undermining future support for public education. Increased private school enrollment, legislative initiatives for vouchers and charter schools, decreased funding for education, and voter rejection of local school bond and levy elections are the current indications of this discontent. In the current atmosphere of parent disenchantment with public education, educational leaders can not afford to fuel the fires of discontent.

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Appendix

"Organizing for parent involvement is like bringing the ocean to a boil."

-- Don Davies

Parent Involvement in Decision Making

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